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Man who shot pope just tip of an iceberg

USA TODAY: How did you become interested in terrorism?

STERLING: As a political correspondent in Italy, I watched the development of terrorism there during the 1970s as part of my job. In 1978, when Aldo Moro, the Christian Democrat leader, was kidnapped and murdered by the Red Brigade, it seemed to me that the time had come to look a little further into this phenomenon. Until then, everybody accepted terrorism more or less as just a local thing. But I thought I better just have a look over frontiers, to see if terrorists were working together.

USA TODAY: And what did you find?

STERLING: There was collaboration among terrorists to exchange arms. They were all going to the same training camps. They were all using the same getaways and sanctuaries. From the late 1960s on, Cuba had set up the first big terrorist training camps, where the Palestinian resistance and several groups from Europe went. From there, the center of gravity shifted to the Middle East and Libya. The Cuban instructors would go to Libyan camps, and the East German, Czech, Bulgarian, and North Korean instructors would go to Libya and the Middle Eastern

camps, which were centers for training in the most advanced techniques in terrorism, in technology, explosives, and so on.

USA TODAY: Who do you believe is financing terrorism?

STERLING: The groups themselves often, almost always, have their own ways of financing their work. They do it by bank holdups and kidnapping for ransom. Their bank holdups would run to maybe \$7,000 or \$10,000 worth at a time — small hits.

USA TODAY: Is the Soviet Union involved in the support and financing of international terrorism?

STERLING: I don't believe there is any single country, or secret service, or group that sits around and invents these terrorist bands and tells them what to do. What I do say is that the Soviet Union, either directly or through surrogates, has made it possible for terrorists operating in the free countries of the world to be increasingly well armed, increasingly well trained, and to always have some safe getaway place.

USA TODAY: Was there a conspiracy behind the 1981 assassination attempt on the pope?

STERLING: After this Turkish gunman, Mehmet Ali Agca, shot the pope in May 1981, there was no great political desire to talk about any possible conspiracy. He was presented as a mad, lone gunman — a crank. Ali Agca did not act alone. He was a professional hit man involved in a large and sinister conspiracy; he was just the tip of the iceberg.

INQUIRY

Topic: TERRORISM

*Claire Sterling, 64, an American foreign correspondent, has been based in Italy for more than 30 years, covering European and Middle Eastern affairs. She became interested in international terrorism during the 1970s. Her most recent book, *The Time of the Assassins*, is about the plot to kill Pope John Paul II. Sterling was interviewed by USA TODAY's Karen Collias.*



Claire Sterling

USA TODAY: Why would there be a conspiracy to kill the pope?

STERLING: Well, this is the first pope who comes from Eastern Europe, who was born under a communist regime in Eastern Europe. He's a very nationalist Pole, like all the other Poles. Without him, there never could have been a movement like Solidarity.

USA TODAY: Are you suggesting that the Soviets would be interested in getting rid of the pope?

STERLING: Yes. And not only do I suggest it, but I believe that the evidence indicates that this was the case. When I started in this, I was just a reporter doing an investigation. I found a chain of circumstantial evidence, from Turkey to Bulgaria, to West Germany, to Rome, indicating direct connections from the gunman to a criminal contraband group called the Turkish Mafia, operating out of Bulgaria, which in turn was controlled by the Bulgarian Secret Service.

USA TODAY: Have the western media reported the conspiracy?

STERLING: Well, the western media have reported the arrests. But since that time, there have been very strong efforts to discourage the western media from believing that there could be any consistency to this case. Newspapers in the United States and in Europe were given disinformation. Their sources were, as they said, reliable, authoritative sources, familiar with the CIA's thinking, or authoritative sources in the U.S. intelligence community.

USA TODAY: Could the U.S. government have had something to do with this cover-up?

STERLING: I'm suggesting that the intelligence community certainly had something to do with the cover-up.

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